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Sri Lanka's seesaw of war and cricket

INTERNATIONAL

Politics

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Last weekend, Sri Lankans huddled together around TV sets to cheer their team battling unsuccessfully for the Cricket World Cup. But nationwide panic following Tamil Tiger attacks on Colombo shattered the momentary euphoria of togetherness even amid defeat.

This seesaw of war and cricket, the island's only current claim to news headlines, cannot match the legendary fame of Serendip, the home of serendipitous people.

What set the island's Sinhalese and Tamil communities against each other? For two millennia, the two pacifist peoples, followers of Hinduism and its offshoot Buddhism, worshipped in adjacent temples. Even last week, Colombo media reported Mahela Jayawardena's Buddhist parents praying at a Hindu temple for his team's success in the World Cup.

The two communities co-existed, often intermarrying, except when set against each other by exploitative kings, colonisers and politicians. Rulers periodically whipped up ethnic sensitivities, as a Trojan horse, to divide and rule.

British rule was a recent landmark in this story. Just as import of consumables made Northern farmers redundant, land acquisition for tea gardens ousted Southern peasants from farmlands. Some locals rebelled, most endured. Traditional resilience brought the communities together and the past was greatly forgotten. Also, administrative streamlining for colonisers' convenience helped reintegrate communities. Road and rail transport for trade and commerce, schools to educate a cadre of clerks as well as lawyers and doctors, and courts to implement law and order benefited people, even by default.

Quick to grasp the basics of representative democracy, native elites joined the political process. After World War II, the crumbling empire and India's freedom struggle hastened independence for the then Ceylon.

The smooth transition to self-rule was cushioned by local mission school-educated civil and judicial cadres at home in the rule of law. However, then came the 'gold-rush' by hastily cobbled together political parties. Local entrepreneurs saw politics as yet another enterprise. As the country's last president admitted, it became 'family business.'

Dreams of multi-ethnic nation building collapsed as the old strategy of divide and rule overtook the rule of law. Race and caste based politics hijacked governance. Trade unions

and egalitarian politics chickened out. Education, employment, land development, and administration became discriminatory. Tamils were the worst affected.

Today most politicians admit the need to rectify these injustices but they lack the political will. The military suppression of southern Sinhalese rebels and of their entry into the political mainstream is seen by some as a model to solve the Northern uprising. A military solution to militancy remains no small threat to the nation's future.

For one thing, when viewed from a people's perspective, grievances behind the Southern uprising have only gone underground, just as Northern grievances continue to fester. After the uprisings of 1971 and 1989, the Southern People's Liberation Front, JVP, found a forum of hope in Parliament. Northern militancy was an uprising of despair after Tamil leaders failed to find a forum in Parliament. If Tamils are to be won back to the democratic process, they must be given hope in the form of a new forum to dispense justice. The proposed autonomous North-East council may meet their aspirations.

Leaders trusted by people of both North and South should craft the framework for such a body. In particular, civic and religious leaders of northern Tamils as well as of Muslim, Sinhalese and Tamil communities in the East should have a voice in the forum.

Desperate problems call for radical solutions as well as magnanimity. The previous president's proposal to appoint a Tamil prime minister was statesman-like. But, recently, the government has proposed replacing the executive president with an executive prime minister. That may be the occasion to appoint a minority person as ceremonial head of State. Tamils and Muslims can hold the office in turn, just as in India. An inclusive second chamber to represent multisectoral interests too has been proposed.

Such moves will help long-term healing and national reintegration. Religions have a major role in that mission. The concerns expressed recently by Pope Benedict XVI and the World Council of Churches must encourage local Churches to effect that mission together with Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims. Of course, religions can mediate effectively only if they practise what they preach. And religions had better make sure the inside of their cup is as clean as the outside.

Australians quietly spiritual, not Godless

AUSTRALIA

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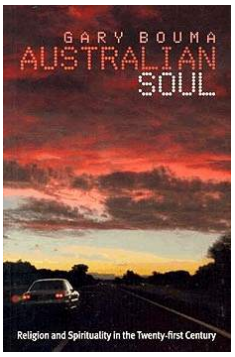
Back in July 2005 Pope Benedict XVI made some off-the-cuff remarks to a group of local priests while on vacation near Aosta in the Italian Alps. He was discussing the self-sufficiency and neglect of Christ and Christianity which dominated Europe. "The mainstream churches appear moribund", he said. Then, out of the blue, he commented: "This is so in Australia, above all, and also in Europe, but not so much in the United States." This sent the Australian media into high dudgeon and like other Catholic commentators I spent a week trying to explain what Benedict might have meant.

Why we were targeted is hard to fathom, although it suits both secularists and bishops to maintain the notion that Australia is 'Godless' and the churches 'moribund'. For secularists it shows that they've been right all along. They claim religion has always been a sectarian blight on Australian life. If we all embraced the 'who cares about doctrinal differences' and 'it's the same God we worship' approach, Australia would evolve into a more tolerant, terrestrial paradise.

On the other hand bishops use our presumed 'Godlessness' to claim the collapse in religious practice isn't really their fault. It's not church structures, poor leadership, dull sermons, uninspired ministry, lifeless worship, or failure to address the real issues facing society that has led to so many people to abandon the church. It is all the fault of crass materialism, relativism and Godlessness. Therefore, it's society that has to change, not church leaders.

However a recent book, *Australian Soul* (Cambridge, 2006), by Professor Gary Bouma of Monash University argues that Australians are not Godless. We're quietly spiritual rather than explicitly religious, holding on to what Manning Clark called 'a shy hope in the heart'. Bouma says that Australian spirituality is rather understated, wary of enthusiasm, anti-authoritarian, optimistic, open to others, self-deprecating and ultimately characterized by "a serious quiet reverence, a deliberate silence ... an inarticulate awe and a serious distaste for glib wordiness."



It could be argued that these characteristics are secular and that to use the word spirituality to encapsulate them is a misnomer. However, it is the reference to 'reverence' and 'awe' that spiritually transforms these attributes. Bouma says that part of the problem is that we unconsciously tend to judge ourselves by the rather ostentatious religiosity of some American Protestants. Australians are far more understated and reverent.

Bouma has argued for two decades now that faith and spirituality are not marginal to Australian life, and that the large majority of Australians have usually thought of themselves as believers, and today identify with some form of personal spirituality.

Throughout much of the twentieth century and certainly after the1960s the predominant view among the chattering classes was that 'meaning' questions would all eventually be

solved by science and that Australia was an explicitly secular society, with an odd and contracting remnant group of 'god-botherers' maintaining the faith. However, Bouma has argued that most Australians described themselves as religious persons even back in the 1970s, the heyday of triumphant secularism.

This doesn't mean that people are flocking to churches. They are not looking for pat answers and don't need a religious authority to tell them what to do. They are suspicious of institutions with all the answers. They are content to live with the questions and certainly want to take charge of their own spiritual lives.

The churches that are growing â€" albeit off a small base â€" are other Christian, oriental Christian (i.e. the Orthodox whose increase comes from migration), Pentecostals and Mormons. He points out that the mainstream Anglican, Uniting and Protestant churches are still in decline. With parallel declines in New Zealand, Canada and the US, Bouma claims that "this represents the waning of British Protestantism."

Bouma is more optimistic about Catholicism which he sees as differently positioned. While he concedes that there have been some slides in attendance and that Catholicism has much larger parishes than the other churches with a very high priest to people ratio, it has a strong system of schools and institutions which he thinks will sustain it. He points out that parents increasingly want to enroll their children in non-elite Catholic schools because of the discipline and values-based education that they offer.

While I think he is over-optimistic about the Catholic church, his views are a refreshing antidote to the prevailing pessimism about Australian religion and sit in marked contrast to those of Benedict XVI.

The virtue of *having a go*

EDITORIAL

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Last Saturday, Martin Flanagan from *The Age* was guest speaker at Jesuit Social Services' 30th Anniversary Dinner in Melbourne.

He spoke about many things. One of them was the virtuous activity of *having a go.* I describe it as virtuous because he linked it with what he called "common goodness". He said that this is found in the midst of wars and despair and, most importantly, "the blindness that flows from political and religious ideology".

His musing could easily be applied to the case of Allan Kessing. Kessing is a retired public

servant of whom most Australians have never heard. He is a victim of such ideological blindness.

Last month, Kessing was found guilty of leaking to the media the contents of two classified reports that detailed serious security lapses at our airports. Publication of the findings of the reports in *The Australian* caused public concern that pressured the Government to commission the Wheeler Review. This eventually led to a major upgrade of airport security.

Instead of being awarded for sticking his neck out in the interest of public safety, Kessing is facing a possible two-year prison sentence and the loss of his life savings through legal costs.

As *The Australian's* Janet Albrechtsen wrote in her blog , protecting deserving whistleblowers such as Mr Kessing ought to be seen as a public good. "Government departments will lift their game if they understand there are laws that recognise that leaks serving a genuine public interest may be justified," she said.

Christian Brother Brian Bond suggested in the *Edmund Rice Justice Bulletin* last week that Kessing's case is reminiscent of the campaign to discredit senior intelligence officer Andrew Wilkie. Wilkie resigned in protest at the Australian Government's decision to go to war in Iraq in the face of contrary advice from intelligence experts which was subsequently proven correct. "The case raises important issues of openness and honesty in government and demonstrates the lack of protection for those individuals like Mr Kessing who take a stand for the common good when governments behave in a dishonest and deceitful manner,â€ he said.

Martin Flanagan was surely referring to the actions of Kessing and Wilkie when he ended his address by sharing his belief that moving forward requires â€œa certain spirit, in part of defiance, which is native to this placeâ€ .

â€œAfter all, who among us wants to be remembered for not having had a go?â€

Quirky visuals elicit empathy with troubled soul

FILM REVIEW

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The Science of Sleep: 106 minutes. Rated: M. Director: Michel Gondry. Starring: Gael GarcÃ-a Bernal, Charlotte Gainsbourg website

In reviewing music video genius Michel Gondry's debut as both writer and director, it would be remiss to not first mention his former collaborations with screenwriter Charlie Kaufmanâ€"a writer whose preference for esoteric, highbrow premises (think *Being John Malkovich* and *Adaptation*) presage the concept-heavy nature of *The Science of Sleep.*

Of Kaufman's five films to date, the two directed by Gondryâ€"*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *Human Nature*â€"are arguably the most affecting. Not that they're any less cerebral, but because they also contain a hefty dose of pathos; they're 'heart' films as well as 'head' films, and Kaufman can probably thank Gondry for this fact.

On the other hand, perhaps Gondry should be on his knees in gratitude to Kaufman for paving the way to *The Science of Sleep*, which is even more immersed within the colourful waters of the human psyche than any of Kaufman's films. It'll no doubt find a ready-made audience among Kaufman fans, even if ultimately it's a less fulfilling film.

The plot centres onâ€"or, more accurately, takes place inside the mind ofâ€"frustrated artist Stephane (Bernal, exuding a gawky vulnerability that's a far cry from the quiet charisma or sensual confidence that's typified most of his roles to date). Stephane has an overactive imagination and is prone to bizarre dreams and daydreams; the fact he's working in a tedious calendar 'design' job further fuels to his feral fantasies.

To make matters worse, Stephane is in love with a kooky neighbour named, significantly, Stephanie (Gainsbourg), and as his advances go unrequited, he finds he's having more and more trouble distinguishing his dreams from his waking reality.

There's no easy way out for the audience, either. Gondry doesn't flag where the dreams start and end, so although sometimes it's obvious that Stephane is dreaming (such as when he finds himself fighting off his inane workmates with a pair of oversized hands) it's often hard to distinguish between the two.

The narrative thread gets lost in the midst of the Freudian frippery, and I guarantee you won't be able to pick it up again. But while this will leave some viewers cold it will no doubt delight others, and leave them itching to attempt *The Science of Sleep* again.

Visually, the film is beautifully realised. Gondry is a fan of in-camera effects and, during *The Science of Sleep's* dream sequences, creates some engaging and imaginative visual effects without resorting to CGI. One particular highlight involves a bustling cardboard city literally springing up before Stephane's eyes.

Special effects aside, the strength of the filmâ€"and the thing that helps it transcend being merely an exercise in quirky visualsâ€"is that Gondry manages, as he did with Human Nature and Eternal Sunshine, to wring plenty of emotion out of his high-concept premise. In particular, you'll feel plenty of empathy for both the troubled Stephane, and for Stephanieâ€"the hapless recipient of his strange and awkward affections.

In praise of hypocrisy

COLUMNS

Summa Theologiae

Published

15-May-2007

Public discussion of climate change and drought has a familiar shape. There is a growling exchange between the big picture and the small picture. Those who demand demonstrable effectiveness deride small and local initiatives as romantic, useless and even harmful. Saving shower water will do nothing for the Murray Darling basin. Without international cooperation, curbing Australian carbon emissions will do nothing for the world but will hurt Australian prosperity.

Some critics supplement this criticism by accusing their opponents of hypocrisy. Advocates for radical action to address climate change are found to drive gas guzzlers, spend their life on planes, and live in houses that need their own power plant to run them.

To a Catholic sensibility these exchanges seem familiar and crude. They recall Reformation polemic against the value of sacraments, and Enlightenment polemic against the value of prayer and of faith. Seeing is believing, what cannot be measured is ineffective, what is flawed is without value. Hostility to symbolic gestures, of course, goes back beyond Christianity. When the Syrian Minister Naaman came to the prophet Elijah to be cured of leprosy, and was instructed to bathe in the Jordan, he complained about the triviality of the gesture. Even if it had any value, there were better rivers back home to bathe in.

Christian reflection on sacraments provides a useful lens for looking at ecological gestures. Sacraments are symbols that bring into effect the things that they symbolise. Water is life-giving; baptism gives life. Bread sustains life, and so does the Eucharist. Sacraments are effective. The key to understanding how they are effective is to realise that they work in another dimension. Baptism and Eucharist give life and sustain life in the spiritual dimension. Anti-sacramental polemic always assumes that sacraments and prayer are effective in the physical dimension of our lives.

When seen in that light symbolic gestures, whether at personal or at national level, are effective, even though they will have a barely measurable effect on water supply or global warming. Their effectiveness is in another dimension. They shape the ability of human communities to respond to the challenges posed by nature.

When we become personally involved in ecological issues by saving water or by reducing our need for power, our attitudes change. Our world becomes different, and our sense of what has priority in it also changes. We find it natural, not quixotic, to live more simply, to question our profligate waste of energy, and so on.

If these practices and awareness become widespread, social attitudes also change. We then put pressure on our governments to address new priorities, even if they will affect our own standard of living. A new view of the world is taken for granted.

We can see this process in the way attitudes to tobacco have changed. Once conventional wisdom, backed by commentators, questioned the effectiveness of quixotic gestures, like insisting that people not smoke at meetings. But such gestures, supported by good argument, led smoking to be seen as a destructive habit, tolerated only as a private idiosyncrasy.

The measures that individual governments take to address climate change and drought can also be effective in the same way. Even if they rely on international cooperation to affect the future directly, they may be highly effective both in helping shape the national outlook and in bringing pressure on other governments to address the issue.

It is common to regard hypocrisy as the ultimate sin. But seen from the perspective of changing public attitudes, hypocrisy is encouraging, not lamentable. It certainly does not discredit the hypocrite's cause. On any issue like climate change, where we need a radical change of attitude, we would expect to find two kinds of hypocrisy.

Because conversion of mind and heart is a process in which we gradually integrate old habits with a new view of the world, there will always be a time early in our conversion when what we do is inconsistent with what we believe. As our conversion deepens, we change our old ways of acting to bring them into harmony with our new attitudes.

If our conversion catches on, our new attitudes may become entrenched within our community. We should then expect some people to parrot our views and publicly act in accordance with them, while contradicting them in their private actions. This kind of hypocrisy is a warning sign that accepted attitudes in society may no longer supported by personal commitment. But it still represents the triumph of these attitudes.

As a personal trait, hypocrisy is unattractive. In the larger picture hypocrisy is, as Oscar Wilde says, the tribute that vice pays to virtue. It indicates that good attitudes are catching on.

Say 'no' to nuclear - but not for the usual reasons

FEATURES
Energy
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Opponents of a nuclear power industry in Australia usually justify their position on environmental and economic grounds. Although their conclusion is correct, the argument is fallacious. Let us first consider the wrong reasons to oppose nuclear power then the right one.

The economic anti-nuclear argument says that the huge costs of nuclear plants make them uneconomic. Absent government subsidiesâ€"which political expediency should counterâ€"hard-nosed engineers and investors will decide if nuclear is a better source of new energy than coal, gas and a variety of less certain technologies. There is no more reason to intervene in this economic decision than any other.

The environmental argument typically cites the dangers of radioactive waste from nuclear power plants. This threat is real, but not much more so than that of the uranium deposits which originally spawned the waste precursors. Quite simply geologists discover most uranium deposits using radiation detectors: this is because the deposits emit radiation and have done so for millennia, and some are so radioactive that they belch superheated steam. Removing radioactive uranium from beneath Australia's deserts, processing and using it in a reactor, then burying radioactive waste in a stable geological structure under the desert looks like going full circle. Nuclear waste is a concern, but not qualitatively more so than the damaging externalities of many industries.

The real argument against establishing a nuclear power industry is that it is a hugely complex and dangerous technology, and Australia has a poor record in safely managing even relatively simple technologies. Australia's institutional framework is not sufficiently robust to safely support a nuclear power industry.

The dangers from operation of nuclear power plants are made clear on the Uranium Information Centre's website . It reports that there have been ten "serious reactor accidents" at nuclear power plants since they began commercial operations in 1952, giving a frequency of one per 1,200 reactor years (although the rate has been lower in the last decade).

Nuclear power is one of the modern technologies that were described in Charles Perrow's seminal 1984 book *Normal Accidents* as so dangerous that accidents would routinely occur: nuclear plants could expect to be plagued by 'normal accidents'. The statistics suggest Perrow was right, but they led to the emergence of a new management discipline built around 'high reliability organisations'. Typical examples are nuclear powered aircraft carriers

such as the USS Ronald Reagan, which is 333 metres long and displaces over 100,000 tonnes, and holds a crew of 6,000, 90 fighter aircraft and two nuclear reactors that can power a medium sized city. America's largest naval vessel is hugely complex but operates incident-free.

Australia, by contrast, has an unenviable record of poor management of technologies. Consider the Royal Australian Navy which lurches from one technology disaster to another. The worst include the fatal 1998 fire aboard HMAS Westralia; a decade of defects in the Collins Class submarines including noise levels that simplify detection by an enemy and a combat system that cannot then defend the vessel; and Sea Sprite helicopters that could not be introduced into service due to computer problems.

Other complex industries and technologies are managed little better. In 1998 alone, Melbourne lost gas for weeks after Esso's Longford plant blew up and Sydney was forced to boil its contaminated water for months. Australia's uranium mines have been plagued by leaks from their tailings dams and the country's only reactor at Lucas Heights has experienced several radiation leaks in recent years.

The lesson of high reliability organisations is that it is possible to achieve safe operation of complex technologies, but only with difficulty. If employees are skilled and trained, a culture of safety is deeply ingrained, and there is effective governance and oversight.

Quite simply Australia meets none of these requirements. There are few technologically complex sectors that can incubate suitable skills in workers, managers, boards and regulators. Thus there are inadequate human resources to staff and safely manage a nuclear plant.

This is not to point fingers or belittle Australian skills. The competencies of Australian workers, managers and boards have built enviable reputations in many modern industries from agribusiness and commercial aviation to software design and tourism. But a country of 20 million people simply cannot develop skills in every activity. For many reasons Australia has avoided nuclear power and most high risk modern technologies whilst other nations have decades of experience. We have no expertise in these fields. To say that Australians have a skill disadvantage in risky technologies such as nuclear power generation is a fact, not a criticism. To say that redressing this gap is impractical should be obvious, not an expression of national inferiority.

Australia has demonstrated an inability to safely operate even simple parts of the nuclear supply chain such as uranium mines and an experimental nuclear rector. When this experience is combined with other evidence, the strongest argument against building a nuclear power plant in Australia is that safe operation is unlikely without a huge effort which probably cannot be justified. Where does this leave Australia's energy supply industry?

Obviously coal and gas fired plants are operational and running reliably, so new electricity generating capacity can employ these proven technologies. If greenhouse gas reduction is required, natural gas should be preferred as a fuel over coal (particularly brown coal) because it produces electricity at similar cost but with less carbon dioxide emissions. In the absence of a compelling case, nuclear power remains a poor choice for Australia.

Children's publishing fuelled by nostalgia?

FEATURES
Literature
Published
15-May-2007

A strange and rare thing happened the other day: a real live child was seen in the offices of a children's publisher. Little Louis wasn't there for an editorial meeting or to discuss the cover design for our latest series. Actually he spent the whole time wriggling around and trying to ingest staples. But his presence did start me thinking about the adult-filled world that is children's publishing.

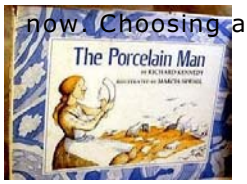
If kids were running our publishing house, lift-the-flap books wouldn't be about finding the fat controller, they'd be about finding the hidden chocolates; Miffy would hand out free ice-creams instead of playing peek-a-boo; and Zac Power would take you on his thrilling missions and then give you his iPod to keep.

Kids can't make all the decisions, not least because every day would be spent at the zoo or on the computer, each meal would begin with hot chips, and bedtime would never, ever come.

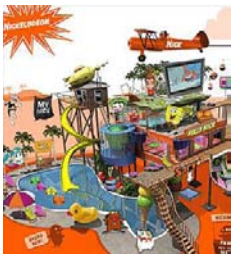
There's nothing radical about an industry run by one group for another; children's publishing isn't unique in this way. Pet food is not made by or marketed to our furry friendsâ€"although a feline-run factory (powered entirely by the underclass that is the canine species, of course) would be very clean. The managers would spend the day dozing in the sun and hissing when anyone came into the office.

Of course kids' books need to be made by adults. But this inevitably gives rise to a certain generational tension. We were all kids once, and most of us like to think that it wasn't such a long time ago. More to the point, most of us like to think that kids today are just like we wereâ€"only with better computer skills and worse table manners.

It's understandable, then, that children's publishing is often fuelled by nostalgia. There's something very reassuring about the idea that what we loved to read will still appeal to kids



now. Choosing a brand of food for our pets is less fraughtâ€"if any of us were dogs in past livesâ€"most of us can't recall itâ€"and we are going to make a more or less rational decision based on price, ingredients and the cuteness of the ad.



Does it really matter that I was a kid before googling was a daily addiction, when terrorism was what the boys did in class when the teacher wasn't looking, and a treat was a carob-coated muesli bar? If I loved the adventures of Enid Blyton and the poems of AA Milne, why shouldn't my child also exclaim *raa-ther* at opportune moments and giggle at the idea that James James Morrison Morrison took great care of his mother, though he was only three?

When I was little my favourite picture book was *The Porcelain Man*. I recently bought a tatty copy on oldandrarebooks.com. When the parcel arrived I felt like a kid again â€" and in my excitement managed to overlook the lack of brown paper and string. I hadn't seen the book for more than 20 years, and was surprised to remember that it was illustrated entirely in pale blues and browns. (The commissioning editor in me did the sums on a two-colour hardbackâ€"hmmm, nice costing.)

Now that I work in children's publishing, what could be more tempting than to make books just like the ones I used to read and love? Have things really changed so much since my milk-moustached, flares-without-irony days?

I want nothing more than to read *The Porcelain Man* to my son, and have him love it as I did. But when I was growing up in the UK, I only knew one girl who mysteriously didn't have a father, and all the kids in my class were white. It might not have been so long ago, but it's worlds away from what most kids are experiencing now. I can't presume to know what will be going on in my son's head when he trots off to school, where there are as many kids with African backgrounds as British, and where some of his friends have two mums.

But this is the challenge of children's publishing. Our own childhoods are a good start, but that's all they are. No Brothers Grimm ever tackled multiculturalism, and Dr Seuss never had to find something to rhyme with blended family. Nostalgia cannot shape a publishing program that will really resonate with kids, although it's a relief that there are more charmed, timeless exceptions than I could name (witches still have blue spit, it's worth checking the back of any wardrobe for secret passages, and green eggs and ham will always be off the menu).

Ultimately, we need to listen, not just remember. Books have to compete with Foxtel and Playstation in a way that they used to compete with roller-skating and Dynasty re-runs for me. I'd love to think the books we are making now might one day belong in that charmed, timeless exceptions section, but first I'd like to make books that kids love now. I won't put chocolate under those flaps, but it's tempting.

What motivates the aspiring creative writer?

FEATURES
Education

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15-May-2007


Premium
salon.com
Deadly prose

It is hard to forget one particular creative writing lesson that might have ended in tragedy. The students were seated in groups critiquing their poems, an accepted and usually harmonious stage of the drafting process. One student who was fairly normalâ€"whatever that might meanâ€"took a comment about his poem personally and verbally attacked the person who had made it.

Within minutes he lost all control and turned his anger on the whole class. I declared an early coffee break and we escaped down the fire exit to the street, a marginally safer place. Up on the fifth floor the man was destroying the photocopier and the notice boards. At the time we believed there was safety in numbers and we did not expect students to carry weaponsâ€"I wonder if we would be so naÃ¯ve today.

I also wondered later why that student had chosen to join a creative writing class in the first place. But rather than ask, I did something more decisive which was to persuade him it was possibleâ€"and desirableâ€"for him to withdraw from the class without losing face or money (or being charged with any crime). The outcome, of course, was a happier class and formalised safety procedures.

By a rough count I have taught eight hundred creative writing students in the last fourteen years in classes that have mostly been happy, busy and secure. When asked about their reasons for enrolling in a writing course, students gave answers to suit the situation, unlike, say, prospective plumbing or hospitality students for whom there are easy answers connected with job skills. They are unlikely to talk about a passion for bathroom fittings or a fascination with cocktails. But creative writing is a matter of the mind and heart. It is about inventing things, and sometimes avoiding or disguising the truth. Paradoxically, it can also be about discovering some truth through the process of writing. While some might talk about the urge to write, the novel in progress or the need for a creative outlet in their lives, there is no single reason people want to write.

One applicant found his urge to write when he was sent a card featuring one of Shakespeare's sonnets. A fourteen-line wonder! He admitted that despite thirteen years at school and five at university he knew nothing about poetry. Another class included nine lawyers studying crime fiction. Some planned to desert the law when they had made enough money from writing stories about people who break it.

Others have complex reasons that they don't fully understand themselves. Some profess to have a 'passion for writing' but cannot show any writing generated by this passion. It turns out they have had a very long term writer's block. Some who enrol in search of a structured learning environment arrive late for every class and leave early. When asked why

they bother coming at all they do not seem to know.

There are people whose reasons for wanting to write are so tangled up with their lives that they might burst into tears during the first class and never return. Or they might let their secrets out over weeks or months, those things that are so hard to put into words, loneliness, grief, medical problems or feelings of inadequacy. There might come a time when it is safe to say what seemed confronting or self-centered at a first lesson.

I recall one brave person in a class I came to admire greatly, who made her problems known early on. She said she could not get to class on time because she was bi-polar and her medication caused her to sleep late. In the next couple of weeks seven others in that same class admitted to similar problems. A change in the class starting time helped solve some problems on the practical level.

More importantly, everyone in the group benefited from such openness and from theâ€"perhaps coincidentalâ€"creativity of these eight students. Words like breakdown, medication, tragedy, counselor, psychiatrist, abuse and abandonment came to be used openly in class. All this was far from 'writing as therapy', and it was noticeable how every student's writing skills developed in an environment that allowed needs to be expressed and met.

I think a lot about people I have taught. About what they gained from the experience and whether it met their expectations. About what I gained, what I did well, what I could have improved. I wonder what happened to the girl who turned up for the first class and was never seen again. Did I offend her in some way? Every 17th March I think about the Irishman who said he couldn't be expected to attend class on St Pat's Day. I am delighted to bump into one or other of the eight bi-polar sufferers and hear they are still writing, still trying to make sense of their world. I think of the man from whom we fled down the fire stairs. Did he write a poem about that experience? Write out his anger? Make a video?

I can play with answers, blame myself, the students, the system or the trains. Whatever the reasons, in most cases you never really know who these people really are or why they are studying creative writing, no matter what they say, write or do.

Vietnam's miracles of balance

TRAVEL

Published
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On the main road out of Hanoi, just across the Red River, a police motorcycle escort cut in front of us, then manouevered to surround an old red school bus. When the convoy U-turned, we saw that the bus was full of seated Vietnamese dignitaries. Standing up, all the better to gawk around, was Bill Gates, an American in the country to give money from his charitable foundation to support a program of childhood vaccination. His many millions were welcomed, as were individual travellers' handfuls anywhere in Vietnam. Hostility to the aggressor in the American War is confined to such sites as the War Remnants Museum in Saigon (although that was first called the American Atrocities Museum) or in the propaganda film shown before the tour of the Cu Chi tunnels which praises the 'Monthly American Hero Killer'.

We headed east after Bill's departure, past a grim and as yet unoccupied new town, brick factories with fields of kilns around them, the ubiquitous coffin-makers. This is the chief coal-mining region of Vietnam, the bleakest part of the country that we had seen in the course of three weeks journeying from south to north, reversing the historical momentum of the war as we went. In Mao Khe dust thickened the air; settled grey on leaves and people, on the four live pigs strapped on a cyclo and on their way to market, on ducks in ditches. Then the landscape began to change. A mountain range emerged through the haze. We would approach them to the edge of, and then into the South China Sea at Ha Long Bay.

This is the sublime region popularised by the film *Indochine*, where it was a punishment post for the French officer who romanced Catherine Deneuve. Now the harbour was crowded with junks taking crowds of tourists down rickety gangplanks and aboard, stretching the capacity to survive intact Vietnam's greatest visual asset. But once on, all became quiet.

Our junk cruised among miraculous karsts, 3000 islands of limestone that are the peaks of drowned mountains. Here were sea caves, narrow water alleys between islands, giant keyholes through cliffs, range upon range receding dimly into the distance. Deep inside one island was a vast grotto of stalactites and stalagmites. A low cave opening led us into a lagoon all enclosed by high cliffs on which brown monkeys capered. Sellers of food and drink and curios approached the junk in rowboats. On some of the islands were shrines and graves. Everywhere the silence was liquidly present, disorienting as well as serene after the tumult of the city streets of Vietnam.

And yet the city cyclo traffic could be negotiated because in Vietnam cramped spaces have generated considerate attitudes rather than rage. There were miracles of balance all around: the cyclo driver insouciantly carrying a huge pane of glass, children perched on the divider between the frenzied lanes of Highway One, ready to sprint across, the narrow raised walkways for women to negotiate paddy fields, fishermen standing in black coracles made of bamboo.

These physical accommodations to crowding and privation tempt the traveller into laudatory flights, but the people's attitudes seem altogether too matter-of-fact for those. Incongruous, then, to find the homage to Ho's embalmed corpse in Hanoi (especially when the legend of his humility has him asking for a simple cremation), or to see the large and garish museum honouring Ho Chi Minh ('Bringer of Light' in one of his fifty aliases). Here his life is told as the quest romance of a hero who endures perilous travel abroad before returning as saviour of his country.

Images of Ho are rare in the south. So too are cemeteries for those who fought for what the victors call 'the Saigon regime'. Yet the nation seems more homogeneous than the terrible divisions of war (over only a generation ago) might have led one to expect. There are, after all, traces of much earlier habitations and ways of life: the economy of the Mekong, where we languidly cruised among islands and crossed at one of the widest reaches where the river rolls its miles-wide tide along, the spit-roasting of rats in a Nha Trang alley, playing cards strewn in every street, the ancient ruins of the Champa culture in central Vietnam, where the Hindu religion found its eastern extremity and eighth-century brick temples are bracketed by B-52 bomb craters, the French hill station of Sapa near the Chinese border, 1600m high, and home to the Black H'Mong and Red Dzao mountain people, as well as that tourist stream whose groups we would re-encounter along the length of Viet Nam. We were part of a paid-in-advance, carefully managed caravan, entranced by the juxtaposition of the ghastly and glorious, hardly visible to the pragmatic people among whom we pushed and shuffled.

Flying with disability in Second Life

MEDIA

The Net

Published

15-May-2007

The virtual world Second Life has had a lot of bad press recently in Australia that has focused on the narcissistic and unprincipled behaviour of some of its inhabitants. Nearly six million people have joined Linden Lab's Second Life since it went public in 2003 and there are currently 1.75 million 'active' members who have logged on in the last two months.

As a 3D virtual world, everything that exists in this virtual worldâ€"objects, buildings, clothes, landâ€"has been created by the residents. Amid all the bad press, it is sometimes overlooked that Second Life also offers a very positive experience to people, especially with regard to understanding disabilities and offering opportunities to those with disabilities.

As a student Niels Schuddeboom travelled to Australia and was a reporter in Sydney for

the 2000 Paralympic Games. Based in the university city of Utrecht in the Netherlands, he is confined to a wheelchair and was forced to drop out of his media course due to an uncompromising academic regime that was unable to work around his physical disabilities.

Known as Niles Sopor in Second Life, Niels has found an opportunity to forget his disability and experience walking life through his avatar. "Perhaps the most profound difference I have experienced is that people have treated me differently" he said. "In real life, due to my wheelchair and lack of physical coordination, people often regard me as intellectually as well as physically disabled."

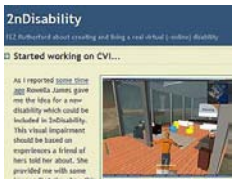
In the Netherlands it is unusual for people with physical disabilities to have jobs and there is a culture of protecting them from many aspects of life. Second Life has offered Niels the opportunity to break the mould. He runs his own company as a consultant on communications and new media.


disabilitynow
Virtually the same

Some companies are now using Second Life to experiment with alternative marketing campaigns. As well as offering commercial opportunities, Second Life has also provided Niels with the tools to express himself in artistic ways denied him in real life. He has, for example, been able to hold a camera in Second Life and take photos and make short movies.

Australian David Wallace, a quadriplegic who works as an IT coordinator at the South Australian Disability Information and Resource Centre in Adelaide has also found an outlet for his artistic side in Second Life. He recently held an exhibition of his Second Life art at the building that Illinois-based Bradley University have established on Information Island. Unlike Niels, David wanted to buy a wheelchair when he first entered Second Life and couldn't find one! He has tried to build one in Second Life but has only had limited success .

David has found people to be very inclusive in Second Life, commenting on his blog, "You've got all sorts of weird looking people in there, but everyone I've met seems to get along and be accepting." British Second Lifer and cerebral palsy sufferer Simon Stevens (aka Simon Walsh in SL) has also kept his wheelchair, carrying it when he dances in Wheelies, the nightclub he operates in Second Life.


2nDisability
Started working on CVI...

Able-bodied Fez Richardson has created the blog 2ndisability to record his work on developing applications for use in Second Life that replicate for the user the sensory experience of a first life physical disability. For example, he has developed applications that replicate various symptoms of different forms of blindness and cerebral palsy.

Not all visitors to his blog or people who meet him in Second Life understand that Fez is trying to comprehend how it might feel to be disabled. He has described this need to find out firsthand how others experience the world.

"Where I come from students sometimes do social projects at school. One kind of project is that they go to town in wheelchairs (although not disabled) and try to realise what kind of problems persons bound to a wheelchair face every day." Now other visitors to Second Life have been able to share these experiences.

Rowella James was the first visitor to try out the blindness application and she found, "The blindness was very disorientating to say the least. The weird thing was that for me the speech bubbles were gone too, so I could only see what was being said when I had the history window open. Of course moving around in that state is not advisable as there is no way of guiding yourself by audio or touch. The stuttering caused a bit of confusion at first for the person I was talking to, but once they understood what was going on they didn't have any problems with it."

Others imagine that virtual reality will begin to play an important role in banishing the loneliness, isolation and depression that is all too often part of ageing as well as playing a big role for people either living with diseases that make them housebound or with permanent disabilities.

Glossing over Kevin Rudd's Catholic school days

AUSTRALIA
Politics
Published
15-May-2007


brisbanetimes
Rudd's schooling? It's private

A recent article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* contended that Kevin Rudd's experiences as a junior secondary school student at Brisbane's Marist College Ashgrove in the early 1970s could have been responsible for his move away from Catholicism to Anglican worship and shaped his politics.

It has been suggested Rudd likes to gloss over his 18 month tenure at the so-called elite college because it contradicts the story of a hard-luck childhood he has allegedly 'spun' to the electorate.

I attended Marist College Ashgrove nearly a decade later than Rudd, as a day student not a boarder. However, my experience does share some similarities to what is documented of Rudd's experience. Both Rudd and I were the youngest children in our families, and we both attended the school in the year succeeding the sudden deaths of our fathers. We both had experience of the dormitory lifestyle of the boarding component of the college, mine as a lay supervisor in the late 1980s, and we both later joined the Australian Labor Party.

If the *Herald* article is correct it may explain Rudd's apparently indifferent and tepid acknowledgement of his association with the college. The significance of the Ashgrove experience may go beyond any influence it may have had on Rudd's faith and politics. More importantly, it may have influenced his personal integrity and approach to leadership.

It is true that too little is still known of the Opposition Leader. He has assumed the leadership of his party with less parliamentary experience than his predecessor, Mark Latham, whose leadership deficiencies are still raw in the minds of the Australian electorate. The polls â€" whether or not you put much faith in them â€" indicate Rudd is only a handful of months away from being our next Prime Minister.

Undoubtedly Rudd's brief period at Ashgrove would have left a strong impression on a young boy still suffering from the loss of his father, but this period is less likely to have caused him to eschew his Catholicism, or forever to have shaped his politics.

The *Herald* article is misleading. Neither by the standards of today nor those of the Rudd era could Marist College Ashgrove be considered an elite school. Rudd would not have been the only son of a share farmer or a nurse boarding at the school at that time. Historically the college has had a broad socio-economic mix of boys attending the school. My best friends in the 70s and 80s reflect this. One friend's father worked on the wharfs, another owned and developed large tracts of Gold Coast hinterland property. Another one had a father who was a grader operator for the local shire council, and another was the son of a Brisbane public servant. This mixture of backgrounds added to the culture and spirit of the school at that time.

It is a stretch to view Rudd's Ashgrove as being overly dogmatic. The Marist Brothers are a Catholic order of French origin noted for a progressive theology. This theology would have been given renewed vigour in the period after the Second Vatican Council. But yes, it was a quintessentially institutional Catholic school. We had public displays of prayer and worship and a strong devotion to the Virgin Mary. We regularly inscribed JMJ (Jesus, Mary and Joseph) at the top of our workbooks.

Rudd's reflection though, as quoted in the *Herald* article, that there was a culture which condoned violence, has merit. Like many boys' schools, Catholic or otherwise, not just of the era but both before and after, Marist College Ashgrove could be uncompromisingly and physically tough. It formed its young men according to the motto *Viriliter Age* interpreted then as 'Be A Man' but recast in post-modern times as 'To Act Courageously'. This would have been intimidating for a shy, non-sportsman grieving a father's loss at such a crucial stage in his development. Even in my senior year as a school prefect, and with reasonable sporting achievements behind me, I hid the pain of my father's death from my friends and the school community. I shunned any talk of him and went missing from father/son gatherings. It was not the done thing to display a weakness.

On balance, it is hard to see how the college had the pervasive impact on Rudd that the *Herald* article suggests. Far more probable is the contention the school was not a 'fit' for him at that stage in his, and its, existence. To go searching for darker shadows that do not seem to exist runs the risk of sullying the reputation of a strong Brisbane institution and intruding into a public citizen's private life.

The master of talkback radio

OPINION

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15-May-2007

I regret something I did recently. I rang talkback radio. Granted it was Jon Faine on the ABC, so a refined kind of talkback, not the grubby 3AW or 2GB kind, but I still felt slightly used. The prime minister was taking questions, and I wanted to ask him about Workchoices.

To my surprise I was on the air quickly. I asked Mr Howard what options my partner had after being sacked just before Christmas. She had quarelled with a bullying employer and been summarily sacked. After a few sympathetic pleasantries, the prime minister made the response I'd expectedâ€"unless he knew the details of the case he couldn't comment, there are a few bad employers and plenty of good ones...all the usual platitudes. I was pleased he'd given this predictable response, because I'd prepared my retort in advance.

Yes Mr Howard, I said, there are some bad employers and some good ones. The point of good industrial relations legislation, surely, is not to allow the bad employers to do what they want. Workchoices does allow bad employers to do what they want because it gives them a free hand to dismiss workers. Whatever you suggest otherwise, Mr Howard, there are no protections from unfair dismissal for any worker in a business employing under 100 staff (and precious few for bigger companies if managers are smart enough to invoke the 'operational reasons' defence).

That *was* going to be my response, and it is a good one. But I didn't get to say it. Vainly I tried to interject, but Mr Howard is a master of talking over people he doesn't want to hear from, and as soon as he'd finished it was on to the next caller . I could have smashed the phone!

This case illustrates precisely why politicians like talkback radio. By going on talkback they can appear to be available in an open and unstructured forum, reaching out over the heads of the media to constituents. But far from being open and unmediated, talkback is a highly controlled and contrived forum. Guests like John Howard have the last word, and

talkback hosts, Jon Faine included, make sure that they get it. As quantity always seems to win out over quality in mainstream radio, and brevity over depth, the emphasis is on giving as many callers as possible the chance to ask a question.

The result is a few rushed seconds of questioning from the caller and a couple of minutes of spin in return from the politician, with no chance for the caller to push the issue further. If the politician likes the question (and this kind of question is often asked by party members organised in advance to ring in) he or she can provide an answer that is little more than a political advertisement. If not, the politician simply gives the answer he or she wants to give, whether it is relevant to the question or not.

The result is a vacuous orgy of platitudes, simplistic arguments and spin that contributes little or nothing to real debate over serious issues.

The previous sentence could just about sum up current political discourse in Australia. The greatest problem in contemporary Australian politics is the absence of debate over ideas and policy, and the lack of evidence provided to support arguments. Both the Coalition and the ALP respond to each other's policies in a calculated fashion that tries to avoid proper discussion of substantial issues. These methods include the targeting of the messenger rather than debating the message; avoiding the issue; and repetition of a pre-determined message with minimal or no supporting evidence.

Unfortunately, the press gallery actively encourages this avoiding of real debate. All too often, in both the 'tabloid' and 'quality' media, journalists reporting on political jousting seek to identify a winner in the interplay of political spin, rather than reporting on the merits of ideas and policies.

The measure of a healthy democracy is not whether every person can make his or her voice heard, but whether people have access to information in order to participate in the democratic process in an informed way. What is desperately needed in our political discourse is quality, not quantity.

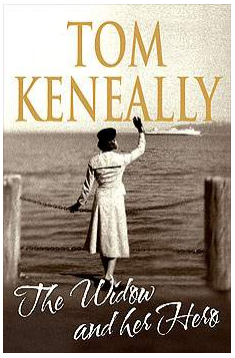
The next time I hear the prime minister on the radio â€" or the opposition leader, for that matter â€" I would like to hear a panel of experts asking questions about policies. I do not want to hear more spin.

Of course I know that the chances of this happening are minimal. Why would any politician open him or herself to real scrutiny when talkback hosts provide an easy forum for trite spruiking? The fact that we desperately need such analysis and debate won't, unfortunately, stop talkback radio being little more than sound and fury signifying nothing.

Keneally's mature insights into character
BOOK REVIEW

Fiction
Published
15-May-2007

Tom Keneally, The Widow and Her Hero, Doubleday Sydney 2007, ISBN 978-1-86471-101-1. 297pp. Hardback. RRP $49.95 website

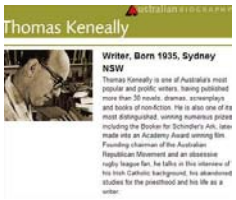


Although Tom Keneally fans might consider it heretical to undervalue the popular novels of his middle career, it seems likely that in retrospect Keneally's earlier and more recent works will be considered his greatest achievements. The exuberant art of novels such as *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967) and *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1972) focussed baby boomer yearnings for Australian identity. The skilfully crafted *An Angel in Australia* (2003) and *The Widow and Her Hero* provide mature reflections on the formative influences experienced by that ageing generation.

The author's prefatory acknowledgements specify the setting of this story. Grace, the narrator, is the daughter of a Braidwood bank manager when cousin Mel introduces her to comrade-in-arms Leo Waterhouse. Although Grace knows from their ritualised attacks on one another that they are training for "something more exotic than ordinary soldiering", she could not have anticipated that they would become heroes and martyrs, much like the members of Operations Jaywick and Rimau, the 'real' wartime Australian commando raids on shipping in Japanese occupied Singapore. Grace and Leo marry in 1943, and enjoy happiness briefly, because Leo's fate leaves Grace deeply scarred.

Grace, in her eighties, addresses her memoir to her grand-daughter, and Keneally makes her tale realistic and troubling. Grace is convincing because she admits her failings, her flaws, her doubts and her frustrations as a widow. Far from undermining the major themes of the novel, the complexity and humanity of Grace's character place the forces that crushed Leo into stark critical contrast. As the details of Leo's operations, capture, torture and execution become clearer, Grace's resentment deepens and strengthens. Because she does not spare herself, Grace seems justified in taking offence on Leo's behalf.

The betrayals are many. Within the Independent Reconnaissance Department for whom Leo and Mel work, senior military men who will never again go to war "find it politically inadvisable to defend them even from the enemy â€| that's the burden of my tale". Leo promises that they will marry when he returns from a secret mission. Grace notes the Homeric idea that a man must "undertake a quest to earn the company and solace of his woman", a handy one for nations "organising their young for war and bloodshed". While she does not urge Leo on, nor does she question his naive commitment. She calls the men a "hiking-running-tumbling-paddling-infiltrating caste", but says that "most of them were babies, and I too a bush infant". Eventually, she says "I became educated. Widowhood was



my education".

The US high command was "singing from a different hymn sheet". Macarthur, suspicious about Australia and Britain wanting to resume colonial suzerainty in South East Asia, saw their military adventures as gestures towards that end. Decades later Grace learns from an intelligence officer, that the Americans knew Leo's team had encountered trouble because they had cracked the Japanese radio code, Ultra. They did not tell the Australians lest they take action that would alert the Japanese that their code was cracked.

Leo's commander, Charlie Doucette, dubbed an "impudent cavalier" by Grace, and a "madman born out of his time" by Dotty (wife of one of Leo's comrades-in-arms), finds heroic status in war. A regular soldier of the Royal Ulster Fusiliers, Doucette rescued people from Singapore, but his wife was interned. Leo's father, an agricultural administrator in the Solomon Islands, is also a prisoner. Originally Grace finds it "easier to believe in my own death than in Leo's" but Dotty's fears about Doucette's plans "put the first shock of panic into me".

Eventually, Grace and Dotty learn that their men are missing, possibly captured. Out for dinner in Melbourne, they resent the "home front warriors" dining around them. Grace writes a popularly anthologised poem 'To the Beloved Missing in Action', but finds that even after Japan surrendered, news came slowly. After some weeks, she learnt of the executions, but tried to be "brave for Leo's sakeâ€"Leo's presence still so strongly abided that I would sometimes forget that I had joined that venerable category know as War Widow". Grace dreads further information because she was "dazzled and disabled by its [the execution's] vibrant blackness". The violation of Leo's body is a barrier to healing. She fears new knowledge but is also ashamed that a widow should feel this way. She thinks she is a bad wife because she fears that if she learns more she might hear some "terrible, indigestible reality".

Years later, she is dragged to Canberra on a delegation to see the Minister, and is told that Leo and the others, possibly under torture, had betrayed knowledge of the newly designed British one man submersible craft they were using. "My ears were ringing. I knew I was failing Leo, not up to his strength". In the 1960s, her distress deepens when she learns that the British submarine failed to keep its rendezvous. Fearing the awkward questions of a researcher, the officer responsible for liaison used the suicide pill issued on that operation two decades earlier.

Grace remarries and is absorbed in her job as an English teacher, but Leo's story resurfaces periodically with new details. She learns that Leo's trial was a farce, with the Japanese simultaneously feigning respect for heroism and condemning the commando operation as breaking the rules of war. In the 1980s, Hidaka, the translator, shamefully brings Grace a diary Leo wrote on toilet paper for her. Grace breaks down howling and punching the old man. She cannot bear to read it for three weeks, but from the diary, she learns that they were proud to the last that 'the bastards didn't hear us beg'.

Unlike some widows, Grace is never troubled by her husband's ghost. Perhaps this is because she didn't want a hero because "a person is never married to a hero". She concedes that "the men were living according to Tennyson, whereas Dotty, and soon I, were determined to live in the age of Auden and TS Eliot." By illuminating so clearly the worlds of

the hero and the widow, Tom Keneally enables the reader to understand why the two are separate and incompatible. To the extent that novels exist to provide insights into character, minds and decisions, *The Widow and Her Hero* is arguably Keneally's best.

Someone will have to go

POETRY

Published
15-May-2007

Portrait of Leonard Drysdale, clerk, Birmingham, England, 1946

Ever punctual I stride,
past doors of frosted glass and stencilled names,
the expected sounds of typing.
A morning nod to Mrs Flegg in reception,
then along to my office,
closing its door to sigh at the overflowing in-tray.

Some use of dictaphone and telephone,
issuing curt instructions
while examining the state of my fingernails.
Straighten my tie, trot down the corridor
to pretend excitement or dismay over the latest regional sales report
in the office of pencil-tapping Mr Codling
who dispenses, as always,
a terse "Could be better."

Sandwiches for lunch and a three-sugared cup of tea,
set down by Mrs Wilkins,
a limp in her left leg, but quite a dancer before the war.
Four trophies on her mantelpiece at home,
how they must gleam.

In conference with Mr Pettiwood.
Having looked at the quarterly figures, he says
that someone will have to go.
It's Weems, a bit of a gambler, a bit of a tippler,
whose eyes stray from sales charts and balance sheets
to ankles and the racing form.

I watch Weems pack his things,
the framed photo of his wife.
Weems shakes each proffered hand,

I wish him luck and mean it.

The weekend,
a dutiful visit to father in Coventry.
The sitting room with a fox hunting print on the wall,
this sagging house he finally owns
after forty years at the foundry.
Some talk, some quiet, the sharing of a pie
and three bottles of ale.
I watch my father climb the stairs to the bedroom,
know the chair on which he'll drape his shirt and braces.

Sunday night, I catch the train back to Birmingham,
my attic room and downstairs landlady who tolerates
the jazz records I play.
Sidney Bechet and more Sidney Bechet,
trying to imagine New Orleans
as I polish my shoes
for Monday morning.

Arthur Marsden working on a sculpture of the writer Edgar Bowers

I'm working on his nose,
it's the nose of a hardened drinker.
Still, he's written his books. A dozen of them,
translated into twenty languages.

He's full of stories,
jail and madhouse stories,
times with the rich and famous
in villas in Spain and France.

It's his wife who's paying for the sculpture.
I'm a big fan of her paintings. Can't afford one myself.
She sure understands the natural world.
Her paintings of deserts and skies, they're unequalled,
make me glad that I'm not a painter.

I love stone, working it,
the sound of the hammer against the chisel,
chipping away, the form appearing.
I forget the clock, forget to eat.
I'm a pair of eyes, looking, absorbing, deciding.

Never wanted to be anything else.
At twelve, I was hauling up boulders from the beach
in Dad's wheelbarrow,
began sculpting seagulls and cormorants.
The garage workshop and the back garden were covered with them.
At fourteen, I did my first sculpture of a person, my Mum,

done from photographs and talking to Dad about her.

At the age of fifty,
all I know is that my heart is a boat,
its destination threatened
by foul inner weather lasting for days,
that leaves its captain unsure of his mind,
his face in the cabin mirror,
half purple, half yellow,
lacking a mouth.

But I wake on this studio floor,
remember that I have a loving wife,
others who believe in me
and I rise
knowing exactly
how my latest sculpture must proceed.

I take up my hammer and chisel,
sing an old Irish sea shanty
as the stone chips fly and fall.